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SOME IMPRESSIONS OF MY ELDERS

BERNARD SHAW AND J. M. SYNGE

BY ST. JOHN ERVINE

I

THERE is a kind of shy, embarrassed man of merit who cannot keep or even reach to his proper position in the world without making some sort of pretence about himself. Bernard Shaw is such a man. He has created his legend with such extraordinary skill that those who know him well have great difficulty in persuading the general public, which has neither the time nor the intelligence to understand a man of marked personality, to believe that the legend is a legend, that the reputed Bernard Shaw is not the real Bernard Shaw. The common notion is that he has an insatiable craving for publicity, is immensely conceited and self-centered, and does not care what folly of thought or conduct he commits if by so doing he draws attention to himself. The truth about him is that he is a shy and nervous man, singularly humble-minded and sincere, very courageous and full of quick, penetrating wisdom, and so generous and kindly that he may be said to be willing to do more for his friends than his friends will do for themselves. He is a Don Quixote without illusions. When he tilts at windmills, he does so because they are *windmills*, and he wishes them to be modernized and worked by electricity. In print and on platforms, Bernard Shaw brags and boasts and lays claim to an omniscience that would scandalize most deities, but no one who has the ability to distinguish between sincerity and mere capering is in the least deceived by his platform conceit. He is one of the very few men in the world who can brag in public without being offensive to his auditors. He can even insult his audience without hurting its feelings. There is a quality of geniality and kindness in his most violent and denunciatory utterance that reconciles all but

the completely fat-headed to a patient submission to his chastisement; and his most perverse statements are so swiftly followed by things profoundly true and sincerely said that those who listen to him are less conscious of his platform tricks than are those who merely read newspaper reports of his speeches. This is largely due to the fact that the newspapers print only his flippant and fantastic stuff, and omit his vital matter. I have seen reporters at one of his meetings sitting with their pencils loosely dangling from their fingers while Shaw spoke wisely and deeply, and then, when he uttered some trivial or outrageous thing, coming to life and hastily scribbling the jape into their notebooks.

It is my purpose here to insist that Bernard Shaw is a shy man with a large element of the gawky schoolboy in him, so that he is awkward and embarrassed when he comes suddenly into the presence of strangers without having been warned that strangers are to be encountered. I have seen him blush like a boy on finding people in a room which he had expected to find unoccupied, and when one meets him casually in the street he is at first nonplussed and without conversation or power to do more than smile amiably. It is not easy to make this shyness of his plain to those who have met him once or twice because he has remarkable powers of recovery and can cover up his initial embarrassment with very great skill; and also because his platform manners are very easy and his general social manners are exceedingly gracious. He has made many pretences in his life, but the one pretence that he has never succeeded in maintaining is the pretence that he is a bad-mannered man. There are stories told of him that seem to show him in a graceless, even cruel, character, but these are no more than might be expected from a man of nervous temperament who is being bothered excessively by the demands of people who have no right to make demands on him at all. Against those stories may be set far more stories of acts of exceptional kindness to those who are in trouble or in need of advice and encouragement. Very few great men have given so generously of their time and strength to helping young men of talent to obtain recognition as Bernard Shaw has done.

His awkwardness of manner when taken unawares is very different from that of Mr. Yeats in similar circumstances. Shaw is shy and awkward with strangers, but Yeats, who has never been shy in his life, is only awkward.

Shaw, because he is naturally gracious, recovers himself more quickly than Yeats, who has cultivated his graciousness; and it may be said of them that Shaw has the manners of a man instinctively gentle, whereas Yeats has the manners of a man who has practiced deportment before a cheval glass.

II.

It is obvious that a man so shy and easily embarrassed as Bernard Shaw is cannot hope to make a swift impression upon his contemporaries unless he commits an outrage upon his own nature. A world which regards modesty as a sign of incompetence, if not of actual imbecility, is slow to recognize the real merits of a man unless he lays claim to merits which he has not got. In the long run, the crowd pays tribute to great men, but Bernard Shaw was anxious that tribute should be paid to him immediately. Fame at the age of eighty offered few inducements to him, and posthumous fame offered no inducements at all. He had something to say to a world disinclined to listen to him, and he felt that he could not persuade it to do so unless he first of all performed some unusual platform tricks to catch its attention. Something of his principle seemed to be in the mind of a tipster whom I saw on Epsom racecourse before the war began. I was walking in the crowd on the course, which the police were not yet clearing, when suddenly a very well-dressed man in my neighborhood seemed to go out of his mind. He whirled violently round, uttered a fierce yell, flung an expensive silk hat into the air and waved his gold-headed cane in a very disturbing fashion. He then began to chant in a manner not unlike the way in which Mr. Vachel Lindsay recites his poem on the Congo! . . . By the time he had finished this performance, a considerable crowd had collected around him. I was in the forefront of it, and while I was wondering how long it would be before the police arrived to take charge of the demented man, he recovered his sanity and proceeded to sell tips for the two-thirty race. I bought one of them. I put money that was rare and precious on the horse which he commended to my patronage. And the horse lost the race! . . .

Bernard Shaw climbed on to platforms and into newspapers, shouting at the top of his voice, "I am better than Shakespeare" in the hope that he might convince the world

that he had merit as Bernard Shaw. He performed tricks in public in order to make people believe that he could think in the theatre. He wore comic clothes and refused to shave and conducted a rebellion against evening dress and silk hats and boiled shirts. He declined to eat meat, to smoke tobacco or to drink wine. He said that he was an atheist and an immoral writer. He tried to train his eyebrows into the shape which is called Mephistophelian. He saw himself in the role of the Fat Boy in *Pickwick Papers* trying to make men's flesh creep, and was disgusted to find that the Fat Boy's most valuable asset, his obesity, had been denied to him and given to Gilbert Chesterton, who would not make anyone's flesh creep for the value of the world! Finally, he announced that he was a Socialist. His Socialism was not a platform trick: it was his serious faith; but it became so associated in the public mind with his platform tricks that he had only to say in public that he was a Socialist and his audience would giggle as if that were the most amusing thing they had ever heard. This habit of performing platform tricks undoubtedly drew a large crowd to listen to Shaw, and he did not fail to deliver himself of his peculiar faith to that crowd when he had collected it; but there were considerable drawbacks to his method of securing attention. The crowd could never quite rid itself of the belief that Shaw was "one of those comic chaps." It admitted that he was a very clever "comic chap," but firmly at the back of the popular mind was the belief that Shaw did not mean one half of what he said and was not entirely sincere about the remaining half. It liked to see him performing in public, and it paid large sums of money to hear him lecture in behalf of causes that were abhorrent to it. Duchesses, for example, contributed heavily to the funds of Socialist societies simply for the privilege of hearing him speak, and duchesses do not love Socialist societies. The crowd talked about him to a remarkable extent; it read his books; it attended performances of his plays; it went to hear him lecture . . . but it insisted that what was important about him was, not his advocacy of this or that, but his power to excite laughter. When he was most in earnest, the crowd said, "He's so witty!" and left the matter there. That, perhaps, is why *Common Sense and the War* aroused so much wrath in England. The crowd, accustomed to tittering behind its hand or laughing outright at Shaw's wit, was dis-

concerted by the serious way in which he dealt with the War in that notorious pamphlet. It was so shocked by what he said that it professed to be indignant that any man could cut comic capers at so awful a moment. Shaw was not cutting any capers, comic or otherwise, but the crowd, trained by him to believe that he was a comedian, could not believe that he was capable of being anything else. That pamphlet, ill-timed, perhaps, in some respects, was yet well-timed in this respect, that it reminded the British people of their most priceless privilege, the right of free speech. The whole of the British press collapsed before the Press Censor, and editors were afraid to open their mouths about things which were scandalous. Bernard Shaw restored the freedom of the press. He said what he had to say and he said it with the utmost courage and force, and within a week or two from the date of publication of his pamphlet, the timid editors were rearing up their heads and daring to say "Boo!" to the political geese.

There were times, perhaps, when Shaw seemed to be yielding to the mob's desire to be tickled, when the one thing apparently that moved him was his delight in making the crowd giggle and guffaw; and now and then his friends felt that he was overdoing the tricks, that he was monotonously informing people that he was "better than Shakespeare" . . . a statement that seemed as idle as if Anatole France were to say that he was "better than" Victor Hugo, when in fact the men are so dissimilar that there is no means of comparing them . . . but the danger, such as it was, amounted to little: for when all the discount is made that can be made for possible charlatanry in Shaw's character, there remains this indisputable fact that he has left a mark on the thought and life not only of the English-speaking world, but of the whole of Western civilization, which cannot be eradicated. We may go to the theatre to laugh at Bernard Shaw, but we remain to think with him.

III.

Oddly enough, there was another dramatist, also an Irishman, whose practice was precisely the opposite of Bernard Shaw's: a shy, nervous man who permitted himself to be cheated of a position of authority because of his modesty. John Millington Synge was what Bernard Shaw might have been had he allowed his nature to run off to

dark corners and hide itself. Synge could not compel himself to climb on to platforms or make extravagant boasts. He may have had the desire to make boasts, but he had not the courage to do so. An excellent comrade for an individual on a country road, he was so nervous in the presence of an audience of more than six people that he was in danger of physical sickness, and he may be said to have died of sheer inability to assert himself. Had it not been that Yeats was by to do Synge's boasting for him, the world might never have heard of that singular man of twisted talent. Yeats, indeed, boasted so loudly of Synge's gifts that superficial persons began to believe that Synge was a greater man than Yeats, and I remember on one occasion hearing young women, fresh from Newnham, boldly declaring that Yeats' chief title to remembrance would lie in the fact that he had discovered Synge! I have never been able to convince myself that Synge was a great man of genius; it is not necessary to convince oneself that Yeats is a great man of genius . . . the thing is obvious. Synge was a man of peculiar and interesting talent whose work smelt too strongly of the medicine bottle to be of supreme merit. He was the sick man in literature, and he had the sick man's interest in cruelty and harshness and violent temperaments. He had the weak man's envy of strength and the weak man's liability to mistake violence for strength. His plays were better than Yeats' plays . . . *Riders to the Sea* is immeasurably better than *Kathleen ni Houlihan* . . . but Yeats is a greater poet than Synge was a dramatist. I am disinclined to believe that Synge was a *great* dramatist. He brought a desirable element of bitterness and acrid beauty into the sticky mess of self-satisfaction and sentimentalism which is known as Irish Literature, but I feel that he was lacking in staying-power. He shot his bolt when he wrote *The Playboy of the Western World*, the chief value of which lay in the fact that it ripped up the smugness of the Irish people, than whom there are no other people in the world so pleased with themselves on such slender grounds, and taught them the much-needed lesson that they are very like the rest of God's creatures. Synge portrayed the Irish people faithfully as he saw them: he put in the element of poetry in the Celtic character, but he also put in the element of cruelty; he put in the wit and generosity, but he also put in the dullness and the greed; he put in the gallantry, but

he also put in the cowardice; he put in the nobility, but he also put in the gross brutality. In other words, he saw at the same time the idealism of Padraic Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh permeated by the incredible brutality of some of Mr. De Valera's ruffians, who lately tore an old man of seventy years of age from a tramcar and foully murdered him in the street, while terrified Irishmen and women, destitute of physical and moral courage, stood by and watched them do it. He knew the delicate sense of beauty which suffuses the poetry of Padraic Colum and he smelt the odor of the charnel-house that rises from the work of James Joyce, and had he been able to keep the two sides of Irish character justly poised, he would have been a great man of genius; but he was not able to keep the balance between them . . . he tended more and more to see merit in cruelty and harshness, and he turned away from the sensitive and delicate beauty of Padraic Colum to the sewer-revelations of James Joyce. People tell me that *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, his unfinished play, is the greatest of all the plays that have been written about that unhappy and romantic lady; and perhaps what they say is true, for none of the plays that have been written about her, Herbert Trench's or A. E.'s or W. B. Yeats's, are in the great line, though all of them are interesting. But judged by itself or in relation to plays generally, it does not seem to me to be a great drama nor is it so meritable as some of Synge's own plays of earlier origin. It marks to me the limit of his range, and shows signs of drooping energy. Some may say that I am attributing to failing powers what should be attributed to sickness and the imminence of death, but I think I am dealing justly with this odd intruder into the realm of letters when I say that his talent was a small one and that had he lived for twice as many years as he actually did live, he would not have produced anything of greater note than he had written when he died.

IV.

Platform tricks saved Bernard Shaw from falling to the Synge level. Contact with rude men and ruder women in public places kept him in familiar alliance with normal things, and so it came about that his genius, though it soared, never soared out of sight. He marched ahead of the crowd, but he never went so far ahead of it that it could not catch up with him. He urged reluctant men and women to fol-

low him along paths that were obscure and difficult, but he never urged them to try a path which he had not himself explored. Not all of his advice was accepted . . . not all of it was worthy of acceptance . . . but all of it, accepted or rejected, was listened to. He would have found a readier agreement to take his advice if he had been less logical in his arguments, but his mind governs his life so completely that he cannot make any allowances for the wayward character of the average man. He has given himself so completely to his mind that his feelings seem to have atrophied. He is incapable, apparently, of understanding the beauty and fascination of mere irrelevancy. A study of his work reveals no consciousness on his part of natural beauty. He seems not to know that a tree is a lovely thing, that its loveliness is entirely without moral or sociological significance. He would probably agree with Dr. Johnson that one field is very like another field, that water in one part of the world is identical with water in another part of the world . . . and would be just as remote from the truth as Dr. Johnson was: for one field is not like another field, and water in one place can be very dissimilar in look from water in some other place. Shaw would not suffer one pang at the destruction of St. Paul's Cathedral if he felt that its destruction made the processes of life slightly more convenient to the ordinary citizen. If he had to choose between Reims Cathedral and an improved drainage system for France . . . a thing which France very badly needs, as anyone with a nose can tell . . . he would choose the drainage system. The College of Cardinals is less lovely in the eyes of Bernard Shaw than the members of a Borough Council. He would rather possess a good fountain-pen than the first folio of Shakespeare's plays. There was a man in Dublin who singularly resembled him in everything except wit. Francis Sheehy Skeffington, who was wrongly executed in the Easter Rebellion in Dublin in 1916, had Shaw's logical faculty without Shaw's redeeming wit. He was a very honest, courageous, and personally attractive man, just as Bernard Shaw is, but he was also a very wrong-headed man and totally incapable of any sort of concerted action with other people. Bernard Shaw's wit brings him into more cordial relationship with other human beings than Sheehy Skeffington would ever have achieved. I remember, just before the war began, meeting Skeffington in North Wales. He, too,

was insensible to natural beauty and was without respect for tradition or ancient institutions. I took him one evening to a lake in Anglesey where many reeds grew. I asked him to watch while I clapped my hands, and when I had done so, thousands of starlings flew out of the reeds with a great fluttering of wings, making a tremendous disturbance because they had been roused from their sleep. Skeffington gazed at these birds as if he had never seen a starling before. I judged by the look of astonishment in his face that if he could have persuaded himself to believe in magic, he would have regarded me as a magician. By merely smiting my hands, I had filled the air with fluttering birds! This experience so interested me that I decided to make other experiments with Skeffington, and so, on the following day, I took him to a field outside the village where some very fine druidical remains were to be seen. I led him up to the stones and waited to see what effect they would have upon him. He looked at them for a few moments, and then, quite unmoved by the fact that they had been standing there for more than a thousand years and were all that was left of an ancient religion, he took a piece of paper from his pocket and, murmuring in his high-pitched Ulster voice, "I think I'll do a little propaganda!" thrust it into a crevice of the old altar. The paper had VOTES FOR WOMEN on it! He was totally incapable of understanding why this act of his disgusted me. His mind was indifferent to such things as tradition . . . he simply could not visualize those stones as anything other than a remarkably useful hoarding on which to advertise his latest enthusiasm. I suppose that if he thought of the druids at all, he thought contemptuously of them as barbarians to whom had been denied the enlightenment that he had; and his desperately logical mind, working on the fact that many persons would visit these remains, suggested to him that here was an excellent opportunity of thrusting his propaganda upon the attention of people reluctant to give any heed to it! . . .

I cannot conceive of Bernard Shaw doing just that thing because his wit would save him from it; but I feel that if his wit were taken from him or had been denied to him, he would have behaved exactly as Sheehy Skeffington behaved then. It is his superb, spontaneous wit that keeps him in continuous contact with normal men. Synge had no wit,

and because he had not, was thrust into solitude. Skeffington had no wit . . . there never was on earth a man so destitute of a sense of humor as Francis Skeffington . . . and because he had not, he lived a life of intellectual isolation from his fellows in spite of the fact that most people liked him. Skeffington's courage and honesty . . . and I have known few men so courageous and honest as he was . . . served him partly, but not wholly, as Bernard Shaw's wit serves him. Shaw has great intellectual courage and is a very honest man, but these qualities, though they win respect in the long run, have an isolating effect on a man in such a world as this, and were it not for his wit, G. B. S. would be an Ishmael, too. Take the wit from Shaw and the courage from Sheehy Skeffington, substitute for them a fractious sense of beauty, and the result is . . . John Millington Synge.

V.

Gilbert Chesterton has illustrated the peculiar quality of the English mind by comparing the roads of France with the roads of England; and the comparison might be used to illustrate the difference between the mind of Bernard Shaw and the mind of the average man. Chesterton, with that startling profundity that is to be discovered in much of his writing that seems at first merely to be conjuring stuff, asserts that the design of English and French roads, the first all winding and irregular, the second straight as if drawn with the aid of a ruler, shows a fundamental difference between the two races: the English as wayward and casual as their roads, going lazily and easily to their journey's end; the French as logical and well-defined as their roads, going without any circumlocution to their journey's end. Shaw's mind goes directly to its goal, and he tries to persuade the rest of mankind to follow his example. But the rest of mankind does not wish to go by the most direct route to any goal: it wants to dally on the way; it wants to explore all the little bye-paths and hidden corners; it even wants to turn back on its course to examine again some place that it has already seen; and above all, it wants to waste time. When Shaw contemplates the world engaged in this careless way of living, he bursts into a passion of wit where less gifted men, such as Sheehy Skeffington, would burst into anger, and he lashes the world with his tongue. Mankind, because

Shaw is a genius, listens to him, as mankind always has listened to men of genius, in a puzzled fashion, and even speculates on whether it ought not to follow his advice . . . but it is in the nature of man to be illogical, and so, after a little thought, man goes on being wayward and casual. Even in France, where logic has become an obsession, men are more illogical than Shaw would have them be; and it is a very curious commentary on his work that in so logical a country as France, his plays make far less stir than in any other country in Europe. I imagine that the French are so cursed with logic that their minds revolt from the extreme reasoning of Shaw as an overloaded stomach revolts from rich food. Once, in France, when my battalion was marching along a road towards a part of the country in which we had been some weeks before, I heard a soldier in my platoon saying to his comrade as we came to familiar places, "Thank God, they've cut down those bloody trees!" and immediately I understood why the French roads bored the British soldier. That inexorable logic, all that neatness, those terribly straight roads with the trees growing at regular intervals . . . "dressing by the right" as the soldiers said . . . and looking as if the men who planted them had performed the operation according to some mathematical formula . . . all these things, inhumanly tidy and well-ordered, nauseated the mind. I have done much walking on English and French roads, and I will wager that boredom will seize the traveller on a French road long before his interest on an English road has been exhausted. And in their unintellectual, instinctive, wayward fashion, the English are more right about life than the French are. Bernard Shaw, I imagine, is incapable of understanding the state of mind of my soldier who thanked God that the neatly-arranged trees on the neatly-designed French road had been cut down. To him it would seem right that if trees are to be grown at all, they should be grown according to formula. He sees something stupid and wrong in the English method of planting an acorn in any hole that is visible and letting the tree grow as it pleases.

VI

He is greatly generous to young men. Like most of my contemporaries I have imposed upon his good nature very often. I sent *Jane Clegg* and *John Ferguson* in manuscript

to him and asked him if he would read them and tell me what his opinion of them might be. Probably a dozen or more young men were doing exactly the same thing with their MSS. He could probably spend the whole of his time reading other men's plays, if he were to let his good nature go uncontrolled. But he read my plays and wrote long, valuable letters of advice about them to me. I hesitate to mention this fact lest it should cause an avalanche of MSS. to fall upon him, but I am trying to draw his portrait, and unless I mention his generosity to young men, the portrait will not be a faithful one. I am under personal obligations to him of many sorts, and I do not know of any man who so freely helps his friends and says so little about it. He is now nearly sixty-four years of age, but there are no signs of age about him other than the fact that his hair and his beard, once red, have turned white. He still has the mind and eagerness of a young man. His walk is as springy and alert as it was when I first knew him, as I am sure it has always been. When I see him in the street sometimes, tall, lean, very tidy and almost foppish in an unusual way, walking with great assurance and ease, examining now and then his very shapely hands, and gazing about him with that queer, quizzical, kindly look in his pleasant eyes that is so significant of him, I feel that although he is thirty years older than I am, according to the official records, he is, in spirit, thirty years younger. Bernard Shaw will never be old. If he lives to be a centenarian, he will still be talking like a young man; and perhaps it is his extraordinary youth and vitality, as much as his disrespect for established things, that draws young men inevitably to him. His fearless, challenging spirit attracted all those who were in revolt against stagnant beliefs; and even now, when the multitude seems to have caught up with him and his views are less startling than they were a few years ago, he still stimulates the minds of the young and the eager and sends them bounding forward. "You should so live," he once said, "that when you die, God is in your debt!" He bids men and women strive to put more into the common pool than they take out, and he asserts with something like moral fury that anyone who is taking more from the common pool than he puts in, is cheating both God and man. There are querulous persons who say that Shaw's work will not live. Their forefathers probably said that Shakespeare's work would not live, that

Cervantes' work would not live, that Fielding's work would not live, that Dickens' work would not live; and no doubt they produced sound arguments to support their faith. Who could have believed that *Don Quixote*, a mere skit on contemporary novelettes, would win universal favor, or that *Pickwick Papers*, mere verbiage for a set of pictures drawn by a popular artist, would live? Yet these local, topical, and very contemporary things will not perish. Bernard Shaw has indisputably affected the thoughts and lives of thinking men and women on two continents for thirty years. He is a very daring fellow who asks us to believe that this brilliant, original, forceful mind will not continue to affect the thoughts and lives of thinking men and women for generations to come.

ST. JOHN ERVINE.